That White Paper on El Salvador / US Ambassador Robert White and Roger Burbach (KPFA, July 17, 1981)

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good evening this is amanda spake tonight we're talking with roger burbach who works for the center for the study of the americas in berkeley roger has had the opportunity to look at both the documents that the state department released several months ago to support their contention that communist arms were coming into el salvador he's also had an opportunity to read the state department's white paper that was used to support military intervention in the form of military advisers and more military aid to el salvador roger could you describe those documents and what you saw there well the documents which the state department released simultaneously with the white paper uh are supposed to support their contention that there is overt uh communist influence communist involvement in the salvadorian revolution that the salvadorians in fact in their offensive which occurred in january against the ruling junta of that country that those the salvadorans received almost all their armed support from communist countries from cuba they claimed from the soviet union from vietnam and that much of this was channeled through cube through nicaragua this is the contention the basic contention of the of the state department in the white paper now you don't believe that well the interesting thing is these documents which were released uh really in many ways don't support their contention their central contention that it's a communi communist support there are many problems with with the documents one of the key documents which is an alleged trip by the head of the salvadoran communist party handle to the soviet union in that document uh it says flat out the uh that that handle was refused to request from arms by the soviet union he went there asking for arms asking for some type of assistance and the soviet union said no then honda asked them to help them transport arms that they had got from gained from other countries

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gained from other countries some support and the soviet union there also dragged its feet or gave an outright refusal the only request which honda got from the soviet union which was met was the agreement by the soviet union that they would treat train 30 salvadorians now the type of training which was involved uh is unclear to this date so that that is just one example one major document and it simply does not support the contention that the soviet union was involved in any way in the uh in the offensive or in support providing significant armed support to the salvadorian revolutionary forces it's interesting that you mentioned that a couple of weeks ago i had an opportunity to interview a man by the name of reuben zamora who is one of

the spokespeople for the democratic revolutionary front of el salvador and he spoke a bit about the documents he said one of them that was also an interesting one alleged that they were getting something like 20 200 000 uniforms from czechoslovakia which he found amusing because first of all how would the czechoslovakians know how to send these uniforms in the first place and also that there aren't 200 000 rebels that need uniforms are you familiar with that document yes there was there's uh some documents which claim that they're providing uh types of uniforms i think what is interesting about that point which aside from what ruben samurai pointed out that you know the quantities which are involved are are are pretty incredible but even that the only type of assistance which did come from some of the eastern european countries was primarily what they claimed at least was uniforms and medical assistants medical some types of drugs they promise to give it sometimes and and up to backpacks i mean simple very simple things which uh which these documents claim now whether or not these were delivered first of all as a question and secondly are these authentic as as you're pointing out as room and zamora points out what would you do with 200 000 uniforms in in el salvador 200 000 czechoslovakian uniforms i would add tell me when you say there's some question as to whether these uh

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question as to whether these uh items ever arrived why do you question that uh well primarily because uh they're well there is one document which indicates where where they they claim the uh the revolutionary forces claim in one of the documents that the uh some of the assistance which was promised some of that type of assistance simply was not arriving uh recently i think the major issue which has come up recently which is very interesting is the wall street journal printed also ran an article within the past two weeks on the white paper and on the documents this was the first time where the established press the wall street journal or the new york times washington post any press really took a serious look at these documents that came out with the white's paper and it's amazing the wall street journal of course which we recognize is uh in in completely in tow as far as its general support of administration policy came away from an analysis of those documents saying that they were absolutely provided no support for the white paper and left a great deal of questions open-ended yeah the wall street journal article did raise the issue that many of the figures in the documents were extrapolated um and that that tended to detract from the credibility of the white paper what do you think about that well yes there's there's one key point one document c i believe which they dispute uh in the wall street journal uh in their its claim this is the only document which supports with the charge which is made in white paper which says there's 200 000 tons promised of arms and equipment which should go to el salvador this is the only place in in all the white papers in all the documents supporting white papers where any figures is mentioned now this is the key figure which the state department used and they claimed that they extrapolated they simply said well it will multiply just 200 tons times four now where they pick the figure from four according to the wall street journal is is is is an open question and they multiplied it by four and they got 800 tons and they said this is what the communist nations promised 800 tons

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communist nations promised 800 tons uh now it's interesting uh when the wall street journal went to the state department and one of the main figures involved in that john glassman and asked him about the figure for and he simply said well we we we didn't get that from the documents we got that from our own intelligence in other words they they just left it uh where they can't back up anything with the documents they say now it's simply relying on their own intelligence and there's no documentary support offered for that whatsoever okay you've mentioned john glassman now john glassman was the person in the state department that is my understanding found these documents it's interesting i had an opportunity to talk to former ambassador to el salvador robert white yesterday and white said that he described the conditions under which glassman found these documents i think we should hear from him and then maybe we can come back to you and comment a little bit more about what white has to say so this is robert white he was the former ambassador to el salvador recently resigned he was ousted by the reagan administration but he was in el salvador when these documents were found so let's go to robert white now could you describe how the documents were obtained there seems to be some differences of opinion about where they came from at least as i read the wall street

journal articles as i understand it as it was represented to me this foreign service officer john glassman went to the police station and found these documents in a box that was in effect like a file for which they had no particular use in other words the implication being that the police didn't know what they had and glassman found uh these documents which indeed proved to be very to give us a lot of insights into what was going on

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into what was going on well there seems to be some debate about i believe document c which is the one that was supposedly written by a member of the el salvadorian communist party but there are several different handwriting specimens on it or something like that are you familiar with that oh yes but look i have read probably everything there is to read about the documents including the documents themselves and including of course the white paper and what i think at the conclusion that you have to come to is why would anyone fabricate such weak and unconvincing documents the the documents themselves prove very very little right the real the real problem that the american people should have with those who guide our foreign policy is why where does this administration get the right to issue a white paper which claims all kinds of proof for quote communist interference unquote when that proof does not exist in the documents that they cite theirs is just a sloppy uh badly done unscholarly unobjective work and that's the real criticism i see not the the concern should not be for the documents which are almost surely genuine the concern should be for the white paper i see i'm wondering now that you're no long you're out of the uh hot spot as it were you are a former ambassador looking back on your experiences now what do you think is going to be a possible solution

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is going to be a possible solution in el salvador that will meet the needs of the people there well i think if this administration sticks by its chosen course of action which is to provide military assistance and military advisers to the military of el salvador and point that military towards a violent solution of the of the country's problems then i think you're going to see a long drawn-out civil war and the center parties and people will gradually disappear and the two extremes will become more and more powerful and my guess is that eventually the left will win because they enjoy more popular support than the other side certainly they enjoy more popular support than the far right which has no popular support at all to speak of so i think that if this administration sticks to its position of being against a negotiated peace then i see a long and bloody war that was robert white now roger do you basically agree or disagree with what he said about the documents uh yes i mean he i think he finally is hitting the nail in the head that's the first very uh very i think it's the first statement i've heard that he's made where he's really come clean and said uh the same thing which is that the documents are very flimsy and they they simply do not support the white paper and the main problem it turns out is is with the white paper itself and

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is is with the white paper itself and its analysis which is uh totally based on the the reagan administration's right wing perceptions of of the cause of all evil in the world namely the the communist countries and this simply doesn't held up uh what do you think about what he said about the left uh in el salvador having more support or a great deal of popular support that's something that's been denied by the press here uh yes i mean this is also is is very interesting the first time i think white has has come out and said this uh i think he's johnny come lately of course and he's moving away now and trying to explain away his past activities he also said uh that in the future the center would disappear and you'd have only two extremes uh the the center disappeared when ambassador white was the down there in el salvador acting behalf of the carter administration by then um there was no longer any any center guillermo ungo who was the member of the first tunta it simply represents the center uh during while ambassador white was there joined the the democratic revolutionary front so the center disappeared while he was there and it clearly is a struggle between the the repressive regime the military at present and the revolutionary forces and they do enjoy massive popular support do you have any idea how massive that support is and is it growing well uh from uh

recent reports coming up that the uh the guerrilla forces the popular armies which have been forming in the different departments outside of uh outside of san salvador have been growing in strength fairly rapidly during the past months they now talk about popular armies in different provinces composed of several thousand people and these people are under arms and are committed to the struggle and many of them come from the very areas where they live i mean very areas where they are now fighting this this is a popular army this is rooted and based among the the sectors of the population uh who do comprise the vast majority of that country uh i'm wondering you know in the current

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uh i'm wondering you know in the current debate over the white paper there is talk that there will be yet another white paper uh this time on alleging church involvement in communist forces in el salvador another white paper yet has been talked about on guatemala and i believe there will be more and more attempts made to pin arms coming through nicaragua into the el salvadorian rebellion what what do you think about all that well the administration in view of what's happened with this white paper and even ambassador white now coming out against it essentially and the wall street journal coming out and making the shams of it shambles of it i think that the administration be wise to consider whether they want to put out any white papers but the reports i have i've heard also conflicting reports and and one of them the most reliable i've heard was that there will be a white paper in guatemala now it's entirely possible that one of the things they will do in in the case of guatemala is try and say that the church is involved and it is true the church is involved there's no doubt about it and that reflects the uh the situation in the country which is that the church itself is becoming once a revolutionary change to occur within those societies what is happening in guatemala that would necessitate a white paper uh there has been a growing demonstrated strength of the guerrilla forces there the revolutionary forces in in throughout the country uh the the regime of president lucas which is now in power which has been one of the the bloodiest and in history in terms of the number of people killed all the regimes for the past dozen two dozen years almost have been fairly violent but under lucas president lucas that has reached new extremes uh primarily because they're trying to repress the growing revolutionary forces throughout the country and this is reached a crisis proportions the administration the reagan administration is looking for any pretext to dump military aid into that country and even military advisers just as it did in el salvador and so it's entirely probable or possible that they are at present concocting some new white

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are at present concocting some new white paper to demonstrate that the soviet union cuba nicaragua everybody in the supposed communist terrorist world is involved in trying to provide arms to the guatemalan uh insurgents the guatemalan revolutionaries and this of course is to justify massive us military intervention no other reason so you're suggesting basically that we uh we meaning the united states want to pour arms into latin america is the way i hear you talking well yes uh i mean this is the interesting thing which was entirely lost with this white paper came out alleging communist interference communist arms coming in and all figures if you sit down and look at the figures that the administration is saying of arms sales arms deliveries that are occurring to el salvador and if you look at what they even allege u.s arms assistance u.s arms shipments to el salvador have many times over duplicated what they claim the communist countries have given and the u.s is the main the major and from the indications of the reagan administration it wants to step that up the major arms dealer for latin america and particularly now for central america is really the united states that is widening creating the central american war it is not the communist countries of the world why do we want a central american war i'm struck by that uh i think the u.s uh is is in has is paying the uh paying the price for the fact that it's supported repressive uh military regimes in central america for well over two decades now and that the the people in those countries want drastic changes they no longer want the us domination they do not want the u.s to tell them what to do every step of the way and which has happened continually they want to get rid of the military dictators and the this is a really uh in a growing situation a

growing region of conflict because the people are demanding change and the reagan administration comes into office at the time when this change this demand for change for revolutionary change is at its highest point

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change is at its highest point and the us and the reagan administration based on its right-wing ideology uh is is determined to try and stop this through massive arms shipments and it in the process it is widening and creating an effective central american war i think all of us have to wonder and have asked ourselves about the parallels to vietnam which is something you mentioned in your article that there was another white paper that was issued in 1965 before the u.s put massive military involvement arms men into southeast asia um i how does that relate well it's uh to quote someone who said that uh history is repeating itself the first time is farce and the second time is tragedy and that's exactly i believe it's reverse actually but this is exactly what's happening in in central america the u.s in 1965 put out a white paper and and their claim that it was north vietnam which was causing all the problems in south vietnam and then went on to dump massive military aid massive military assistance and ground troops u.s ground troops into south vietnam and there clearly is a parallel this this administration is is repeating the past i think in just in in summation it's important to talk a little bit about what is going to happen in el salvador uh former ambassador white said that he believed a negotiated political settlement was the answer what do you think i think that the basic criteria and what the salvadorian revolutionary forces and what salvadoran people are demanding is self-determination to shape their own society to shape their own government as the revolutionary forces have indicated the democratic revolutionary front they are willing to sit down and negotiate to discuss with any parties that want to come to the table um what type of uh situation what type of new government will be uh created in uh in el salvador now it is true they have certain basic principles which they are going to operate off in those negotiations demands for fundamental changes in their society uh so that is going to be part of the

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uh so that is going to be part of the negotiated process uh there will in a sense there will be a situation developed where eventually i think the us will be forced just as it was in vietnam to go to the negotiating table it's going to lose the war it's losing right now okay thank you roger that was roger burbach from the center for the study of the americas this is amanda spake for voices of mother jones for information about obtaining copies of this program please write the pacifica program service 5316 venice boulevard los angeles zero california nine

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